

VIETNAM: THE EARLY DAYS

Despite the importance of entertainment programming, the news component of AFRTS has always had a key role in the total broadcast operations.

THE ARMED FORCES NEWS BUREAU

At its peak during World War II, AFRS shortwave programs were beaming 1,086-hours of programming a week. One-third of San Francisco's programming was news. Almost twenty-four percent of the New York broadcasting day consisted of news. After the surrender of Germany, the need for extensive operations in New York diminished as troops began to return home or transferred to the Pacific. AFRS cut programming by sixty-nine percent. The staff was reduced to six people.

Fortunately, the fall of Japan didn't end the shortwave operation on either coast. News and feature programs began to appear, including "The Navy Reporter," which went on the air June 5, 1945, and continued well into the postwar period. Secretary of the Navy Forrestal introduced the first program asking sailors around the world to write-in and ask questions on any topic they wished. On the entertainment side, a three-times-a-week program called "Musical Memories" debuted in the fall of 1945.

In anticipation of consolidating operations, some thought to close the New York facilities during 1946. In the end, New York stayed open while the San Francisco station closed. West Coast short-wave operations moved to Los Angeles.

By 1952, sixty percent of AFRS stations around the world had the capacity for tape recording programs. The local stations could record the shortwave programs and rebroadcast them at a later time. While AFRS shortwave broadcasts diminished to fourteen hours daily, the headquarters supplemented the news and information programming with about sixty-three hours a week of entertainment sent out via mail service.

In an effort to centralize the news operations, the Armed Forces Information and Education Office moved the News Bureau to Arlington, Virginia, on December 9, 1965. Four months later, the Pentagon decided to consolidate its Armed Forces Press, Radio and Television Service in New York and the facility in Los Angeles. It would be run by the Armed Forces News Bureau. On January 1, 1967, AFNB began its broadcast operations. Later that year, it became AFRTS-W. Its mission of providing news via shortwave stayed the same.

Not all AFRTS personnel readily accepted the establishment of AFNB. Many expressed concern that the agency represented an "inherent threat of centralized news management and censorship." To others, it seemed that AFNB was an effort to automate and centralize the entire AFRTS operation. That would reduce the networks and independent outlets to no more than relay stations.⁽¹⁾

The concern that AFNB would produce news programs that would present only the military's point of view quickly became moot. Over the years, the AFRTS short-wave operation had written and broadcast many of its own news programs. Once in operation, AFNB eliminated its own newscasts and began sending out only the regular on-the-hour news programs from the commercial networks and audio services. That policy continues to this day. This action removed the concern over managed news, but it brought complaints that the network news now included military spot announcements. By contrast, the shortwave news had no interruptions.

The inclusion of AFRTS-produced spots solved the problem of using commercial news containing advertisements. It provided a way to carry out a key AFRTS mission, to promote internal information. The network simply replaced one form of advertising for another. Plugs for bonds, safety and reenlistment replaced spots for cars, deodorants and aspirins. As Hoyt L. Wirtz, AFRTS Chief of Broadcast Services, noted in 1972, this provided a "fantastic opportunity to deliver messages about service benefits and opportunities."⁽²⁾ The format would prove to be extraordinarily effective and it continues to this day.

By 1972, AFRTS-Washington employed more than two dozen civilians and more than a dozen military personnel. It broadcast 336 newscasts weekly, nearly three-quarters of them "live" from the radio networks. When CBS Radio began its 24-hour newscast schedule April 1, 1973, AFRTS-W began carrying the hourly programs. They built in a seven-second delay in order to give the staff time to insert the AFRTS spots in commercial slots. With the end of the New York and Los Angeles operations in 1966, AFRTS-W became an all-talk operation. It reached troops and Navy ships around the world from transmitters on both the East and West coasts.

THE VIET NAM CONFLICT ESCALATES

Even before AFRTS-W started increasing numbers of Americans were being sent to Vietnam. For the first time since Korea, they were engaged in combat. When President Kennedy came into office in January, 1961, a 685-man limit existed on the size of the U.S. military mission in Saigon. At the end of November, the number of servicemen in Vietnam rose to 948. It doubled to 2,646 by January 9, 1962. It doubled again to 5,576 by June 30.

Two Army helicopter companies were flying combat support missions. An air commando unit, code named "Jungle Jim," was "instructing the Vietnamese Air Force in combat air support tactics and techniques." (3)

As was the history of armed forces broadcasting, Americans in remote locations began to seek means of entertainment. Like those stories of the Canal Zone, in Alaska, in the Philippines and in Casablanca, they began to provide radio services for themselves in "an uncoordinated, spontaneous effort." This happened not only in Saigon, but wherever U.S. troops and advisors found themselves throughout Viet Nam. In Saigon, the station operated in a bachelor enlisted men's quarters using "informally" requisitioned equipment (scavenged and 'comshawed'). The soldier's handmade transmitter reached as far as the military mission in the South Viet Name capital. (4)

On July 6, 1962, Radio Hanoi began beaming programs to the recently designated U.S. Military Assistance Command, Viet Nam (MACV), following the tradition of Tokyo Rose and Axis Sally. Whatever audience the music and propaganda broadcasts garnered, Radio Hanoi lost only forty days later when American Forces Radio, Saigon, went on the air!

In early 1962, General Paul D. Harkins, Commander MACV, directed his chief of communications (J-6, Signal) to look into the matter of providing entertainment and news for his troops. His staff negotiated with the South Viet Name government to use 820-KC in the Saigon area and four other frequencies for use in-country. AFRS in the Philippines donated a World War II vintage tactical transmitter. MACV erected it in the Viet Name Radio Communication complex at Phu Tho. The Rex Hotel in downtown Saigon housed the studios. The station went on the air at 6:00 AM on August 15th. In his opening address, General Harkins cited the connection between the AFRS in World War II and the AFRTS in Vietnam.

"The creation of AFRS proved a boon to the morale of our fighting men in World War II. Today, many American servicemen are again far away from their homes and families in many locations throughout the world. The need for Armed Forces Radio, therefore, continues. It is perhaps even more important considering the complexities of today's world." Harkins acknowledged the efforts of both Americans and Vietnamese to put AFRTS Saigon on the air. He said it provided "tangible evidence of the teamwork that characterizes our joint effort here." He concluded with the "sincere wish that AFRS Saigon will uphold and enhance the outstanding reputation that the Armed Forces Radio Service enjoys throughout the world and that it'll be America's most successful medium of information, education and entertainment."

At first, almost all audio, transmitter and broadcasting

equipment was "borrowed" from the United States and Vietnamese military and civilian agencies. Spare parts and supplies came from various military resources. The staff came from COMUSMACV personnel resources, a five-man crew and several part-time volunteer announcers who ran the station and an initially 18-hour broadcast day. As an official AFRTS outlet, the station used news from the AFRTS-LA short-wave operation. However, neither of the California transmitters at Delano or Dixon produced anything approaching a reliable signal in Saigon. To get the news, AFRTS in the Philippines arranged to relay the short-wave signal. This they did through the Voice of America transmitter for about two hours a day - from 3:00 to 5:00 PM Saigon time.

By mid-August, 1964, the studios and administrative personnel moved from the Rex Hotel in Saigon to the Brink BOQ. That location provided more operating space. The station also acquired a Bauer one-kilowatt transmitter through normal procurement channels to replace the tactical transmitter. That significantly improved both the quality and strength of the broadcast signal.

MACV deployed small 50-watt repeating transmitters throughout South Viet Nam so that most American troops could pick up the signal from AFRTS Radio, Saigon. The Saigon station acquired a 50-watt Gates FM transmitter and two-bay FM antenna, which went on the air by the end of October. By December, when AFRTS sent an inspection team from Los Angeles, AFRTS Vietnam had a staff of seventeen, including six local national employees.

The team found significant problems in coverage throughout the country. AFRTS' final report noted that AFRTS Radio Saigon sent out broadcasts through eleven relay outlets. "According to MACV estimates," it said, "ninety-four percent of the U.S. military personnel in Viet Nam are within range of radio broadcast. The DoD team made personal observations at four of these outlets. They found the coverage to be inadequate because of the technical lack of equipment."

The report praised the success of the Commander's Information, Education and Entertainment program in the Saigon area. The inspection team found that the station in the capital provided "an essential command tool in reaching personnel." They also concluded that the "technical deficiencies of available equipment greatly reduce the effectiveness of AFRT radio broadcast to personnel stationed outside the Saigon coverage area."

VIET CONG BOMBS AFRTS

Before the station could take steps to improve the station's range, it came face to face with the reality of operating in a combat theater. On Christmas Eve, listeners to AFRTS Radio Saigon suddenly lost their signal in the middle of a holiday program. The Viet Cong had set off

250-pounds of plastic explosive at the Brink BOQ, killing two people and injuring scores of Americans. The blast caused considerable damage to the hotel. The stations' studios fell to ruins. The staff immediately turned to an auxiliary unit and put the station back on the air in twenty minutes. They broadcast news reports of the explosion until normal service could be restored about two hours later.(5)

The ability to maintain reliable operations helped AFRTS Saigon create the perception that it served as the soldiers' "little bit of home." The station manager acknowledged that programming remained "a big challenge to satisfy the needs of all our listeners." By the end of 1964, the station's staff of 19 full-time personnel was producing fifty percent of its own programming. The balance came from the AFRTS package. It broadcast local features on Viet Nam, including one-minute spots on the country's history, customs and language. For its live news programs, Radio Saigon used the Associated Press and United Press International wire services. It also aired taped remote interviews for its coverage of special events.(6)

To improve the broadcasting operation as suggested in the AFRTS report, MACV-J6 conducted its own study in January, 1965. It concluded that saturation coverage to reach the 23,000 troops in the country could be achieved by using four 50-kilowatt and several 10-kilowatt stations dispersed throughout Vietnam. AFRTS quickly approved the recommendations and the staff purchased the equipment. Unfortunately, the Saigon government withdrew the use of the station's frequency in the capital. This forced MACV to conduct a general reexamination of the whole frequency and location plan. Outside of Saigon four large stations operated at Da Nang, Qui Nhon, Pleiku and Cam Ranh Bay.

In February, while the efforts to improve coverage continued, the radio programming underwent changes. Radio Saigon, with renewed approval of its frequency increased its programming from eighteen to twenty-four hours a day. It also commenced special FM programming during the afternoon and evening hours as another step toward expanded operation. Meanwhile, in Washington, Pentagon leaders began even more ambitious plans to provide information and entertainment to the rapidly growing number of troops in Vietnam. These plans included television.

THE "BLUE EAGLES"

In May, the Joint Chiefs of Staff gave a special assignment to the Navy's Oceanographic Air Survey Unit. Operating out of Patuxent River, Maryland, they would fly C-121 Super Constellation aircraft as AM/FM and TV transmitters for "research and other special projects." The planes received the names "Blue Eagles." In May, work

began on Blue Eagle One for configuration as a high-power communications and relay station. When completed, the Navy deployed the plane to Viet Nam to broadcast AM and short-wave. They arrived in-country in time to provide live radio broadcasts of the 1965 World Series. Sandy Koufax pitched a shutout in the seventh game as the Champion Los Angeles Dodgers beat the Minnesota Twins 4 games to 3. And, the troops, delighted, heard it all.

Meanwhile, the Pentagon determined that television would significantly contribute to the U.S. policy objectives in Viet Nam. These included policies of rural pacification, urban stability, national unity, free world support and the U.S. presence there. The Navy began special modifications on Blue Eagle Two and Three. Their new configuration enabled them to broadcast television programming on two channels with several radio communications capabilities. Each plane had two television transmitters (200-watts each), AM (10,000-watts), FM (1,000-watts), and short-wave/single sideband with a four-channel teletype hook up (10,000-watts, all simultaneously if required). They also had two video tape recorders, six audio tape recorders, two 16mm film projectors, and a small live studio.

While the Blue Eagles were outfitted, on December 2, 1965, Deputy Secretary of Defense Cyrus Vance approved additional television facilities of outside Saigon. The United States and Saigon Governments reached a formal agreement on December 24, authorizing AFRTS television in the Republic. Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge and Tran Van Do, RVN Minister of Foreign Affairs, officially signed the agreement in Saigon on January 3, 1966. That paved the way for the Blue Eagles to begin broadcasting. Deployed to Vietnam in January, 1966, the planes began flying on February 7. U.S. Forces received television on Channel 11 and Vietnamese citizens viewed Viet Nameese programs on Channel 9.

Television service began with a special program that included speeches by Premier Nguyen Cao Ky, Ambassador Lodge and General William Westmoreland. AFRTS Saigon produced the program right in the airport terminal at Tan Son Nhut. Cables connected the cameras to the video recorders aboard one of the Blue Eagle planes parked nearby. The plane then took off, and at 7:30 PM television came to Vietnam with the broadcast of the official greetings. Regular programming began a half-hour later. The programming initially consisted of the AFRTS television package on 16mm film, coupled with live news broadcasts from the plane's onboard studio.

The first step in providing television for the Vietnamese was a studio set up in downtown Saigon to provide programs on video tape. Vice President Hubert Humphrey emphasized in a speech that television

programs by and for the Vietnamese should be brought to the most remote villages. He believed TV could be "a decisive factor in nation-building and establishing national unity in South Viet Nam." AFRTS Saigon received the task of providing engineering assistance to the Joint United States Public Affairs Office. They would build independent television stations for the Vietnamese government. This marked the first time any Armed Forces Radio and Television network had received the assignment of such a mission.(7)

In a February 5, 1966, memo, the Deputy Secretary of Defense established a four-station radio network using high-powered transmitters. MACV had proposed the transmitters and provided funds to supplement the Command's budget, both for the radio facilities and to increase the proposed television facilities. As part of this effort, construction began in Saigon for AFRTS television permanent studios. Plans evolved for the creation of a South Vietnamese wide television network, improved radio broadcast facilities and an increase in AFRTS personnel.(8)

In short order, contractors built seven television vans, using the model of the AFRTS experience with mobile stations in World War II and Korea. The Sacramento Army Depot supervised the construction of the vans themselves. Each contained complete studio and transmitting equipment, a 5,000-watt transmitter, two 16mm projectors, a slide projector and multiplexer, a full audio and video console and a small studio with TV camera. A mobile camera supplied with a viewfinder could be used in a larger studio. The TV station/van also housed a 120-foot lightweight tower and a specially-designed antenna. Two trailer-mounted 45-kilowatt military generators accompanied the vans. The generators had ample capacity to power the station. The vans were a major achievement in TV engineering for the field.

The major achievement in programming took place on March 24, 1966, when AFRTS established a new two-way Pacific link between Saigon and AFRTS-LA in Los Angeles by underwater cable. This enabled AFVN to receive stateside radio programming twenty-four hours daily from the AFNB in Washington. Even so, major sports events, important speeches and top-rated special events could not be broadcast on a real time basis as they were over networks in the United States.

AFRTS PLANES MORTARED

The war itself again intruded on AFRTS Saigon operations on April 13, when the Viet Cong attacked Tan Son Nhut Air Base with mortars, damaging all three Blue Eagle aircraft. Blue Eagle Two sustained two hits. A survey of that damage by two Navy inspectors concluded that, while the planes could be repaired, the work would

take from nine to thirteen weeks. Although Blue Eagle Three could fly, TV programming diminished to five days a week while civilian technicians and Air Force maintenance men frantically undertook the repairs. After 28 sixteen-hour workdays, Blue Eagle Two resumed flying with its regular television programming on May 11. That was at least five weeks ahead of the predicted repair time.

Meanwhile, the television vans began to arrive in Viet Nam and a small group of technicians began the difficult task of installing the equipment. Under the command of Captain Willis Haas, they located the first van on Vung Chua Mountain in Qui Nhon Province and began broadcasting on September 25, 1966. General Westmoreland cut a ribbon of television tape to open the station. In his remarks, he noted that Qui Nhon was the first ground television station in Viet Nam. The planned country-wide TV network would be of "great value to the troops in providing wholesome entertainment and news of the world."

The Qui Nhon Post Exchange sold nearly one thousand television sets in anticipation of the station's opening! Haas said, "We believe we have 5,000 to 10,000 viewers now and we expect eventually to reach all 24,000 U.S. servicemen in our broadcast area."

Initially the station broadcast for three hours a day, but eventually increased its schedule to fifty-six hours a week. Included was the TV series "Combat." One of the staff observed, "We might even have our own version of 'Combat' one of these nights. We have an alert about once a week because of the Viet Cong."(9)

On October 21, the second van/station went on the air from Monkey Mountain in Da Nang. Four days later, the new flagship station in Saigon commenced broadcasting both AFRTS and Vietnamese programs.

With the need for aerial transmissions over Saigon eliminated, the Blue Eagle planes began flying south of the city to serve the Mekong Delta with Vietnamese programming. Then, on September 30, the beloved Constellations flew their last regular missions over Vietnam. They had performed an extraordinary service, bringing radio and TV to thousands of American and Vietnamese soldiers and civilians. Two of the big planes returned to their home at the Naval Air Station, Patuxent River in Maryland. The third stayed at Tan Son Nhut as a backup for the ground stations.

The Saigon station's official opening took place on October 31, 1966, with Premier Nguyen Cao Ky and General Westmoreland taking part in the ceremonies. They simultaneously cut a video tape stretched between the main studio and the transmitter buildings. They also laid the cornerstone for the new Vietnamese TV studio although actual construction didn't begin until late May, 1967.

Once in the new studios, AFRTS Vietnam became the first Armed Forces Radio and Television operation to present radio news broadcasts on the hour, twenty-four hours a day. A small group of military newsmen covered local news briefings and news from the combat fronts, often providing current information ahead of the commercial press. In addition, the station's news department supplied Vietnam war reports to the Armed Forces News Bureau in Washington for worldwide dissemination.

The staff of AFRTS Vietnam never lost sight of the fact that they were functioning in a combat zone. On December 23, 1966, while a Christmas party was taking place in the new building, the station received small arms fire. No casualties occurred and broadcast operations continued without interruption.

The growth of the United States military involvement in Vietnam required a continued buildup of AFRTS personnel. Arrival of new staff and responsibilities usually outpaced the receipt and installation of equipment. The radio and news sections of the Saigon station moved into the new studios between January 2 and 6, 1967. AM radio began operations from its expanded facilities at 9:00 AM on the 6th. FM broadcasting originated from the new studios on January 13. The network reached its authorized personnel strength of 161 just a few weeks later.

The remaining five vans finally arrived and went into operation. The third van became operational on Dragon Mountain in Pleiku on February 1. Van four, sited on Hon Tre Island, near Nha Trang, provided service to both Nha Trang and Cam Ranh Bay and went on the air March 13. The last three vans arrived at almost the same time, and two went on the air in May. Van five began operations within the city of Hue on the 15th. Van six went to Tuy Hoa and started broadcasting on the 26th. The last van stayed at the AFRTS compound in Saigon where it served as a training unit for replacements.

The Saigon station housed the network headquarters, including the supply and engineering sections. It contained the main studio building with AM and FM master control, a newsroom, three radio production studios and a record library. On the TV side, it had a TV film library, telescine and kinescope room, TV master control and a large television studio. Other facilities in the compound included a transmitter building. It housed two 25,000-watt TV transmitters for channels 9 and 11. It also housed a 1,000-watt AM radio transmitter and a 1,000-watt FM transmitter. A generator building that had three 200,000-watt generators provided power for the entire complex. A 300-foot steel tower supported an 80-foot television antenna, specially designed to radiate signals on both TV channels. The design of the antenna increased the effective power of the transmitters by an approximate factor of

ten, with an effective radiated power of 240,000-watts. That was sufficient to cover Saigon and the entire surrounding area!

THE AMERICAN FORCES VIETNAM NETWORK BEGINS

Despite the increase to twenty-two transmitters, some areas of South Vietnam still couldn't receive an adequate radio signal. To solve the problem, AFRTS installed five high powered AM transmitters throughout the country. Three of the five were 50,000-watts, positioned at Cat Lo (for the Saigon and Delta area), Pleiku and Cam Ranh Bay. The remaining two 10,000-watt transmitters provided a 5-millivolt signal throughout most of South Vietnam. When the transmitter at Da Nang became operational on June 1, 1967, AFRTS Vietnam became a true radio network. It adopted the name "American Forces Vietnam Network (AFVN) in July.

For television, work began on an unmanned repeater station at Phan Rang. It would relay the TV signal from the Hon Tre Island transmitter to the American troops within a 100-square-mile area. When it began broadcasting on October 22, 1967, the television network became fully operational. Estimates indicated that at least eighty-five percent of the American forces in Vietnam were able to receive AFVN television programs.

For the first time in history, a military command had provided full television service to its troops in the field.

There were even more milestones to reach for armed forces broadcasting.

To do so would require more than G. I. ingenuity, more than dedication and hard work. For some, it would require the ultimate sacrifice.

NOTES - CHAPTER 20

- (1) *Broadcasting*, May 13, 1968, p 80.
- (2) *Military Journalist*, Summer, 1972, p 91.
- (3) *Pentagon Papers*, pp 89, 110.
- (4) "Fact Sheet," American Forces Viet Nam Network, n.d. (1972) Unless otherwise indicated, the following material comes from this source.
- (5) *Army Times*, January 27, 1965, p E4.
- (6) *Ibid.*
- (7) *New York Times*, February 8, 1988, p 16.
- (8) Deputy Secretary of Defense memorandum, "Armed Forces Radio and Television Service for the Republic of Viet Nam," February 5, 1966; *Stars and Stripes* (Pacific), September 1, 1966, p 1.
- (9) Teletype story, September 25, 1966; Interview with Willis Haas, November 9, 1984.